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SIX ESSAYS

*on the Development
of*

T. S. ELIOT

by

FRANK WILSON

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN a well-known essay, Eliot has declared that, though a man must choose between reaction and revolution in his politics, the margin of his choice may be a hair's breadth only. The reckless critic will smell out autobiography here, and if this be so, it makes a recent article, where Eliot was represented as the political mouthpiece of the idle classes, the more incomprehensible and dangerous. The politics of the present critic are further from Eliot's than are the columnist's, and I would not wish it to be thought that I am ranging myself under any royalist banner: what I state in these essays as indisputable fact may sometimes be so in Eliot's eyes alone. But it is not my purpose to investigate the poet's philosophy. I am investigating his development as an artist, and concern myself largely with those techniques which have served him so well: these are techniques not to be thrown down by any death-or-glory onslaught, and future poets, whatever their political parties, may prefer to adapt them, rather than to ignore.

PREFACE

I DO not pretend that these essays are in any way comprehensive. They were originally written as six short talks, to be followed by readings from Eliot's poetry, which fact may explain their frequent reduplication of epithet and rhetorical sentence construction. As such, they must inevitably appear foreshortened and banal.

Their function was merely to provide a brief introduction to Eliot's poetry, and to the plays, though I have not scrupled to introduce some critical opinions of my own. The last essay, on the "Four Quartets" was written before the publication of the "Focus Three," and though I have revised it to some extent, does not profit fully from the criticism included in that book.

I have appended some notes and a bibliography.

which Eliot saw, and which met with his qualified but sincere approval: for this we may say that the poet forsook the readers of the Boston Evening Transcript and denied dowager Mrs. Phlaccus and Professor and Mrs. Channing-Cheetah. We find that Eliot has given himself up to a rather conventional and perhaps rather antiquated vision: a paved stair, a garden urn, a girl standing in the sunlight 'her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers,' but we are bound to admit that the poet is well within his rights in denying the modern world for such a vision, even if his heroine does not compel our imagination 'many days and many hours.' But few things are more difficult than for a conscious innovator in verse technique to write a completely successful 'conventional' poem: and Eliot has not altogether preserved his integrity in 'La figlia che piange.' It is unfortunate that disillusion finds opportunity to rear its ugly head here also, that the poet should sum up his experience in the manner of a man at a ledger:

'I should have lost a gesture and a pose—' and it is difficult to see the necessity for the pontifical manner in the last two lines, whether facetious or no.

Mr. Thomas McGreevy, who has written a fine paragraph on "La figlia che piange" in his study of Eliot, would have us condemn much of the imagery of these poems as adolescent. Though there is evidence to support his theory in the melodramatic flourishes in which Eliot here attempts to take refuge from life, I am inclined, like Mr. MacNeice, to consider the early poems more seriously. It seems that Eliot has expressed the negative side of his attitude more clearly than the positive; Beneath a superficial romanticism the reader may perceive what is rejected and even why; but the poet does not seem so confident whether that which is accepted is worthy of acceptance, or no more significant than 'a gesture and a pose'—

'———these things that other people have desired;
Are these ideas right or wrong?'

It is apparent that this quite natural initial reluctance to believe led Eliot to make the most of what he could safely reject, knowing his emotional response to be genuine, and to reject rather callously and out of hand. The mature Eliot is still ready to reject, as in the "Family Reunion," and he rejects much the same things, but although he is ironic, and we feel that if "Prufrock" were miraculously unwritten he 'would say it all again,' we feel he would say it all rather

differently. For beneath the subtle restraint of technique there is here an undercurrent of rather undisciplined emotion. Eliot treats people as if they were places, and "Prufrock" is for him what "Dubliners" is for Joyce; the stage has been set, but (apart from Prufrock himself) the characters are mere décor: the real actors have yet to emerge, and the more sombre tone of the mature artist, though intimated, has yet to be consistently heard.

A NOTE TO THE FIRST ESSAY

I have stated that Eliot has not preserved his 'integrity' in '*la figlia che piange*,' and by this I mean that not only is the poem's close unconvincing, in being not very well done, but also rather insincere. I think it is insincere because I think Eliot has twisted the poem from its logical course of development, simply in order to round off his work neatly with one last cynical thrust. Doubtless, he was uncertain as to the value of his vision. But I think he overstates his uncertainty, both for effect's sake, and because he is not really sure where he stands. This is my chief argument against these poems. Cynical distortion, it might be said, can be a useful weapon in the poet's hands, and 'I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids' may not at first appear to be less satisfactory than Marlowe's 'Sometimes I go about and poison wells.' But it is Marlowe's purpose in such lines as this to make it clear that the Jew does know exactly where he stands, has summed up his world and made the irrevocable choice for evil: his cynicism has the discipline of a final decision about it. Eliot, on the other hand, is trying to persuade us that he has summed up his world when he is 'really in the dark.' He is hitting about him rather indiscriminately in these poems, trusting more or less to his instinct, and when he pretends to be doing more, is falsifying his vision.

II

POEMS, 1920

“ Je connais gens de toutes sortes,
Ils n'égalent pas leurs ^odestins.”

—*Guillaume Apollinaire.*

UNLIKE most of his critics, I believe that a significant development in Eliot's attitude is reflected by the new poems of his second volume. I do not speak of the radical change in technique, to which Ezra Pound bears witness; 'At a particular date in a particular room, two authors, neither engaged in picking the other's pocket, decided that the dilution of vers libre . . . had gone too far.' I speak of what really lies beneath this decision. For it is difficult to believe that Eliot wrote these poems pour encourager les autres, that he adopted a new and difficult verse form merely in order to set a good example. It seems more likely that the poet, conscious that he had something new to say, cast about him for a significant medium and hit upon what the critics call Gautier's quatrain, a stanza which in Eliot's hands has rather a deadening effect. Dr. Tillyard, writing of Milton's "Nativity Ode," respectfully intimates that he finds something of sex in the poem; and we may if we choose find this quality also in the rhythms of "Prufrock." But the "Poems, 1920" suggest comparative sterility. Eliot has not only dispensed with the gusto which sometimes lends pace to the cynicism of his earlier poems, but he has desisted from those visions of the street which almost seemed to pierce to the very heart of squalor. It is not only in the first two stanzas of 'A Cooking Egg' that his method of description suggests a weary contempt for the thing described. And when the poet presents his characters, Sweeney:

‘ This withered root of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes,
This Oval O cropped out with teeth. . . .

or Bleistein :

. . . . this or such was Bleistein's way,
A saggy bending of the knees
And elbows with the palms turned out
Chicago Semite Viennese'

we sometimes find an accumulation of sordid epithet undistinguished by any great energy. This too-laboured description of Bleistein may be contrasted with the powerful and compressed image of 'Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians.'

It is not new for Eliot to describe things in their own terms: there is the same direct representation of vision in, for instance, the "Morning at the Window." But he no longer heightens this representation by means of words like 'damp,' 'sprouting,' 'hovers,' which suggest a comparison with vegetables and birds of prey, although the poet declines to expand his images. In the following fine stanza the word 'base' may suggest solidity, but there is otherwise no suggestion of irregular communication:

'Sweeney addressed full length to shave
Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,
Knows the female temperament
And wipes the suds around his face.'

Such a subject might have lent itself to Chaucer, but Eliot's treatment is in no way Chaucerian. This study of Sweeney is nothing if not fastidious. Sweeney is engaged in extricating himself from a difficult position; he is, so to speak, in full cry, but there is no attempt to communicate tension. We are to 'remain self-possessed' and, although the poem is in a sense narrative, it is not the action, but the poet's attitude to the action, which we are to observe: and Eliot manipulates his rhythms to this effect. We feel that he has even tampered with his classical parodies, which, although often beautiful in themselves, as are the first two stanzas of this particular poem, yet somehow read like amputated decasyllabics: we feel their growth to be stunted.

{I once heard it said by an unsympathetic critic of these poems, that Eliot was the most successful of Henry James' prose imitators.} The poet uses himself as one of James' mirror characters: through his eyes the activities of all the other characters are apprehended. But Eliot distorts the activities he reflects in a way which James may well not have approved. He does not represent his characters clearly, but wearily and with infinite contempt: and he offers us, not only the characters themselves, but their counterparts in antiquity, and proceeds to condemn these also by implication. After

reading the catalogue of Sweeney's misdeeds, we find it difficult to believe that Theseus was much the nobler; and the implied stigma upon Ariadne is too severe to please a romantic reader. Similarly, when Eliot sums up the economics of Venice with 'the Jew is underneath the lot,' I detect a cutting allusion to Byron's lines :

'Ours is a trophy which will not decay
With the Rialto: Shylock and the Moor
And Pierre can not be swept or worn away,
The keystones of the arch. . . .'

and immediately the grandeur of old Venice falls away. This effect is confirmed by the 'Sir Ferdinand—Klein,' a gibe which cuts both ways and suggests that the Princess Volupine, like the 'laughter of children in the foliage,' is not fixed in time. Indeed, a palpable key to these poems is the "*nil nisi divinum stabile est, cetera fumus*," which suggests more than collapse and rebirth of cities, cautioning us also that the colour of the past will not provide us with stable satisfaction. Some critics have rather misunderstood the poems' significance, preferring to think that Eliot is deprecating the conditions of twentieth-century life by comparison with the standards of the past: but when we find Sweeney doubling, not only for Theseus, but also for Agamemnon, and also serving as the mock hero of a Fragment of an Agon, we may be inclined to take him as the (modernised) type of the Greek hero. If we do so, then whatever fault Eliot has to find with him must attach equally with his prototype. And Eliot stations him appropriately enough—'And Sweeney guards the horned gate'*—for us to see him as he is, the simple, rather unscrupulous man, who, if he is arrogant among mortals, stands in apprehensive awe of the Fates, as his speech on death

'I know a man once did a girl in'

testifies.

If we bear in mind the double part that Sweeney has to play, the hero and the twentieth-century man, we come to consider "Sweeney among the Nightingales" in rather a different light. Mr. Matthiessen tells us how: 'Eliot once remarked that all he consciously set out to create in "Sweeney among the Nightingales" was a sense of foreboding,' but cannot himself accept this statement and continues finely: 'The sharp contrast that seems at first simply to be mocking a debased

* This attitude is quite Herculean, and I fancy Eliot does not call him "The King of Clubs" (Fragment of an Agon) for nothing.

present, as it juxtaposes Sweeney with the hero of antiquity, ends in establishing an undercurrent of moving drama: for a sympathetic feeling for Sweeney is set up by the realisation that he is a man as well as Agamemnon, and that his plotted death is therefore likewise a human tragedy.' There is more to be said even than this. Sweeney is cast for the most heroic of parts when the poem begins: he has done duty for Theseus and now is to serve for Agamemnon. He bears himself bravely in his difficulties, but the attitude he strikes is unfortunately a caricature of the heroic: we find him standing spreadeagled, 'letting his arms hang down,' but this is not a preparation for prodigious feats of strength: we hear tell of 'zebra stripes . . . swelling to maculate giraffe,' but Sweeney's torso is not clad in skins. Eventually Sweeney has to admit defeat and abandon his heroic pose:

Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled: and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees.'

The reader is brought face to face with Mr. Matthiessen's 'debased present,' and can do nothing but despise. But later, when we hear mention of conspirators 'suspect, thought to be in league,' and recognise the allusion to Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus, we realise that the poet is casting a slur upon Agamemnon himself—how could that hero, in circumstances no less sordid, have borne himself more commendably than Sweeney? We realise that we can read 'Agamemnon' for 'Sweeney' throughout the poem, without affecting the essential properties of the scene, for only the local colour will change. Yet Eliot's aim is not to discredit present and past alike, it is something deeper: for when both Sweeney and Agamemnon are confronted with death, we feel that both assume a tragic dignity, which, in the hours of their respective glories, they did not possess. The central purpose of this poem, then, is to emphasise the meanness of human activity, in whatever age and however pompous, when set against the mystery of Death. The poet's comment upon the comparative squalor of modern convention is as one of the marginalia of the poem: and even so, he does not describe Sweeney's surroundings as things merely mean. There is a sinister suggestiveness, almost a furtive beauty, in the scene, for all is illuminated by the eerie light of impending disaster, just as the weird light in Grendel's mother's cavern shone upon her fight with Beowulf:

'Branches of wistaria
Circumscribe a golden grin.'

We are approaching what Eliot sees as the horror and glory of life, and we are leaving the boredom behind. It is in such a poem as 'Sweeney Erect,' when the hero is engaged in activity merely insignificant, that the background is mean. 'Doris towelled' does not illuminate the poem in which she appears.

All the poems written in Gautier's quatrain are concerned with the same statement, that, as Eliot warns us in a minor poem :

'Soon the enquiring worm shall try
Our long-preserved complacency.'

There is much virtue in this 'long-preserved,' for it is mankind that the poet compares with Marvell's Coy Mistress, and not only his own generation. And so the poet remains ironically detached when Burbank complains of the decay of Venice, for we cannot escape by blind belief in the past. There is no escape, whether with Sweeney we enter upon heroic vice, or like the waiter, turn in fear from the realities of life (his encounter with the dog symbolising 'the way the world ends'). We cannot make ourselves safe by blindly acquiescing in Church formulæ and going upon our way, though we are equally evading the issue if we ignore even the 'vieille usine désaffectée de Dieu' and blindly sacrifice to the Gods of state. Life is meaningless if we do not weigh the significant facts of life in our minds, and remain always conscious of their significance. And, by himself acting as our mirror in his poems, Eliot forces us to judge his characters in the light of such a recognition.

As we realise this, we come to grasp the purpose beneath Eliot's octosyllabics. A poet is usually concerned with the presentation of matter which seems to the general eye unimportant, in such a way as to impart a real significance which is commonly missed. Eliot, in writing these poems, often selects a subject which might seem to the romantic critic promising: a brothel scene, love and disillusion in Venice, the affairs of Grishkin: and it is his purpose, while treating his subject fully, to make the action described seem quite meaningless. (The significance of these poems lies in their being insignificant.) And he adopts to this end the octosyllabic quatrain, because it suggests a theme like the theme of 'John Gilpin' and by its implied triviality helps him to muffle his narrative, because it seems to convert his classical images into miniatures and so to diminish their grandeur, and because in his hands it proceeds at a leisurely and totally undistinguished pace, thus

proving a suitable receptacle for that dissection, juxtaposition and irony which his subject by its nature demands.* Nevertheless, the reader does not feel quite at ease with some of the poems, and it may be that, though tonelessness was a necessity, the analysis is sometimes too forensic and the poet himself, as mirror, too cryptic. Eliot, unable to stimulate us directly by significant vision, has recourse to daring juxtapositions and unorthodox vocabulary: but one does not feel 'polyphiloprogenitive' to be a success, nor the juxtaposition of the Alps and the letters of the alphabet (based, I suppose, on the verbal quibble).

I feel that Eliot's attitude is not only differently expressed, but different in itself from that which his earlier volume conveys. It is possible to consider each of Eliot's books of poetry—I am not speaking here of the plays—as a whole in itself, whose component parts are the individual poems. For there is a certain interdependence among the poems themselves, and we tend to find the subject of one poem recurring again and again, in a slightly different form, like a theme in music. The theme of the 1917 volume, as I have said before, is rejection; Eliot casts out many devils in the poems, but the nearest he comes to defining a devil is, by antithesis, 'la figlia che piange.' The critic might well have supposed that Eliot's attitude was not far from that of the Victorian poets, as Mr. Leavis has exhibited them: that he was denying the civilisation of his day in favour of something 'half vision, half dream,' represented by the typical Victorian symbol of a woman standing in a formal landscape: and that his attitude differed from theirs only in so far as he was able to stand face to face with the world he renounced, because of his vision of its squalor and because of his superior technical ability, where the Victorians could only turn their backs. I myself prefer to believe that the author of "Prufrock," when he writes the poem, has sensed instinctively that there was something desperately insignificant about his Aunt Helen and the women who came and went, talking of Michael Angelo, and something vitally significant about a certain young woman as she was standing in the garden: but that he did not know in what the difference lay, and was therefore unable to express his perception convincingly. The theme of the 1920 volume, then, is the second, more intense discovery: the poet, who had early recognised the boredom of life, had come to understand something of what lay beneath that boredom. He is able to explain, in the poem

* It remains, however, simple and serious enough to convey the images of 'the unoffending feet' and 'bloody wood.'

"Whispers of Immortality," why the woman who hesitated toward him one night in the light of a door was a meaningless apparition: and he is able to provide the key in "Dans le Restaurant" to the significance of "La figlia che piange." The more assured touch which is perceptible in the "Poems, 1920," is perhaps most evident in the satire. The satire of "Prufrock" and of the "Portrait of a Lady" I feel to be telling, but superficial only: it might be said to resemble the satire of, for instance, Max Beerbohm.* The poet is mocking his characters for what they are, for the unsatisfactory desires and emotions which they entertain, but he does not pause to ask 'what are the roots that grow. . . . out of this stony rubbish.' The satire of the "Poems, 1920," has become vicious, and the attack is switched to the body: Grishkin is analysed, but she is not exposed as Prufrock is exposed, she herself is not even condemned. The poet strikes beneath her, strikes to condemn what he sees as the cowardice and falsehood which she represents. Eliot's body blows are almost always deadly, but when he returns to the old cynical approach, in "The Hippopotamus," we feel that the poem is unsatisfactory in itself, even though, considered as a part of a greater whole, it may perhaps fulfil its function.

The whole which is the "Poems, 1920," would not have been complete without "Gerontion." For the octosyllabics, though they express a complete statement in themselves, express it only by process of negation, and it is because of their cold negative vision that they do not offer the scope which "Gerontion" allows. "Gerontion" is in a sense a heroic poem, for the old man has accepted much of what Eliot would have us accept. He cannot bring himself to evade the issues of life and death, they crowd into his mind, inevitable 'tenants of the house.' He knows that the glory of the past is vain-glory: the story to which he is listening transports him into antiquity, but does not convert him into a hero, fighting in the warm rain. His station in life remains unchanged, unalterable:

'the goat coughs at night in the fields overhead
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.'

He cannot help seeing the counterparts of Sweeney and of Pipit, as 'fractured atoms,' against the terrifying background of death. Nor has he fled from life, like the waiter. As Mr. Matthiessen (to whom I would refer the reader for a more

* In his essay 'Pretending.'

detailed criticism of this poem) points out, he has perceived 'the intimate connexion between the mysteries of religion and sex,' and the subtle ambiguity that enters into the poem with lines beginning 'Signs are taken for wonders' lends a significance something near that of allegory to the subsequent content. I take the book in question to be either the New Testament, or something which suggests to the old man the New Testament; and he examines the mystery of Christ by reference to a mystery more near to him that of the birth and death of sexual desire. ,

"Gerontion" is more obviously a successful poem than any of its fellows, and this because, as I have shown, it is heroic, a positive statement among negatives. It is also a tragic statement among poems written in the spirit of grim, relentless farce. Thus, it is written in powerful blank-verse, which, though the rhythms are often those of modern speech, preserves in style something of the Jacobean flavour. We may feel the poem to be a little too Jacobean, remembering Eliot's warning that imitators of Pope would probably not now use the heroic couplet, but we must remember that the heroism of the old man is underlined by the verse-form, which may also suggest by its associations what I have called the allegory. And the blank-verse, leaving us with a strange feeling that "Gerontion" is an Elizabethan born out of his age, points the tragedy of the poem: for Gerontion is indeed an archaic figure, in a sense. The way of life he adopts is not new: it is a way of life by which many men lived in the past, but which has now been forgotten and must be recovered; and it has been forgotten because it is difficult, indeed tragic. This Eliot is content to intimate here, though it is intimated in almost all these poems as a kind of corollary to their central proposition: but it is to become an uppermost thought in his mind, and to find more decisive expression in his next work, the "Waste Land."

that the dramatic cadences are not used here merely because they would be inappropriate: but the "Hollow Men" cannot be called a lyric. There is much dramatic grouping, though the groups are rather remote from the eye, and the last section is dramatic in its way, though we feel that the drama is at two removes from life. We feel that Eliot has given us a musichall artist singing a song about the cowardice and impiety of mankind, rather than the things themselves.

I feel that the "Hollow Men" marks, not a development, but a new beginning. Eliot, having found it necessary to renounce the world, has cast about him for something to write about, and more, for a new style in which to write. For the "Waste Land" was too comprehensive an indictment to leave him further scope for satire of the world from which he had seceded: his poetry had to be turned in upon himself, since only in his own progress towards his God could he hope to find profitable material for poetry. It was a difficult position for a poet who had always fought against romantic individualism, who had instigated the cult of the 'objective correlative.' He had to assume something of the attitude of Evelyn Waugh's Mr. Samgrass, of whom we are told that 'he alone was real, the rest were an unsubstantial pageant.' The "Hollow Men" marks, then, Eliot's first entry into the religious life. There is in the concluding section of the poem something resembling a litany, and there is an element of ritual in the structure of the verse: as a critic observes 'we have almost entered the church.' But there is little other sign that the poet has found a foothold in his religion. It may be that, at the time when the "Hollow Men" was written Eliot was in the throes of that initial agony which Christianity brings to the believer, and that this agony has contributed to the poem's morbid atmosphere. Thus, the bitterness (it is hardly satire) of the poem, though it is directed against all classes of men indiscriminately, strikes most heavily at those who, while they acquiesce 'For thine is the kingdom,' cannot help crying out 'life is very long': and that the poet counts himself among his hollow men is apparent from the opening line.

In the "Hollow Men" then, Eliot avoids writing of his sufferings in his own person, by admitting others as partners of those sufferings. He obtains his impersonal effect by rather different means in the "Journey of the Magi"; but though he has adapted his statement to the three wise men, we are aware that behind them it is Eliot, in the pangs of spiritual rebirth, who is telling us that he 'would be glad of another death.' The style of the "Hollow Men" has been discarded, and the

poet, who was at this time trying to construct a new style upon the basis of some previous success, no matter which, has the soliloquy of "Gerontion" in mind. But the verse of the "Journey of the Magi" seems to have more in common with the verse of :

' Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee '

than with that of "Gerontion." The earlier poem was in a sense heroic, but the "Journey of the Magi" is, in every sense, a poem of perplexity. The agony seems more tolerable, for the cynicism is not vicious and indiscriminate, as in the "Hollow Men," but it is none the less present. The 'silken girls bringing sherbert' are not symbols of 'what is deceptively lovely in experience,' as Mr. Philip Wheelwright tells us in what certainly seems a deceptively attractive essay. The Magi, though they have evidence and no doubt, find that which follows upon their new belief so bitter that they are tempted to turn back to the old way of life : they cannot do so, because they are 'no longer at ease in the old dispensation.' Thus Eliot also would turn back to the world, the 'silken girls,' though fully conscious of their futility, if it were possible to do so. And, being thus cast down, he is led to paint the world he rejects, for once, in soft attractive colours, and the world he accepts, as represented by the journey to Bethlehem, in verse of uniform darkness.

"A Song for Simeon" may seem to mark a further slight advance. Eliot, who speaks through the mouth of his hero, no longer hankers for whatever idle pleasures may have preceded his conversion : but the result is a weariness which is reflected in the versification—"I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me." He seems definitely to have ceased to strive for the 'ecstasy of thought' which once illuminated his imagery. The visual images of the early poetry were hard and definite, but as Mr. D. S. Savage has observed, there is a steady falling off in precision. As early as the "Waste Land" we find the poet applying a certain technique of understatement :

' The river's tent is broken : the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank.'

Such understatement is in place here, the half-stated metaphor of 'drowning' being a covert reference to the fate of Phlebas, and when Eliot wrote the "Journey of the Magi" he had not wholly given up the old order of imagery. Though

' The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces '

is not a very effective generalisation, the line

“ Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver ”

is still powerful, though the trailing rhythm may give an effect of diffusion. The imagery of a “ Song for Simeon,” however, seems settled and uninspiring, and not even the introduction of biblical kennings like “ goat’s path ” and “ fox’s home ” can compel it from its apathy. With this falling off in visual imagery comes an attendant slackening of verse texture; the vigorous earlier blank-verse has been replaced by long stringy lines which often disappoint by their thinness.*

The initial urge necessary to stimulate Eliot into a new and convincing poetry was provided in his studies in Dante, to which the poem “ Animula ” bears immediate witness. This poem is not altogether satisfactory in itself, the prayer which concludes it seeming—stylistically at least—rather dissociated from that which goes before, but there is a certain welcome tension in the verse. Paradoxically, we meet here with the first instance of that serene and studied imagery which is to distinguish “ Ash Wednesday,” when we are shown a child examining

. . . the sunlit pattern on the floor
And running stags around a silver tray.’

The “ Animula,” though like Mr. C. Day Lewis I find it the best of the Ariel poems, preserves the atmosphere of spiritual uneasiness. The impulse which Dante provided seems to have driven Eliot back upon his earliest poetry. The personification of ‘ the pain of living and the drug of dreams ’ reminds us of the ‘ yellow fog ’ in “ Prufrock,” even to the use of the verb ‘ curl,’ and the verse structure resembles that of the earlier poem, in being a kind of caricature of the Elizabethan grand style. But where the rhythms of “ Prufrock ” preserve something of Laforgue’s gay elasticity, the rhythms of “ Animula ” are harsh and crabbed. This may be because the later poem is concerned with suffering not yet transcended, but I think that the ruthlessness of Dante’s terza rima has caught the poet’s ear.* When the bitterness of the “ Hollow Men ” reappears,

* It may be profitable to compare the rhythm of the passage :

“ Issues from the hand of time the simple soul
Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame,
Unable to fare forward or retreat
Fearing the warm reality, the offered good
Denying the importunity of the blood. . . ” (Animula)

in "Animula," it is thus in more palatable form: though the reader suspects that the "Journey of the Magi" and the "Song for Simeon" did not, after all, bear witness to any progress, however slight, toward spiritual serenity, but merely failed to convey the full bitterness which they had to represent.

That Eliot was preoccupied with the birth of the soul when he wrote "Animula" suggests that the time of his regeneration was near: and I feel that; when he wrote "Ash Wednesday," the process of rebirth was complete. For I believe that "Ash Wednesday" was composed during a period when Eliot's prayer

'Teach us to care and not to care,
Teach us to sit still'

had been granted him. This is not to say that the sufferings which the poem commemorates are not real, but that the poet has been able to transcend a suffering he still endures. There is a conflict within Eliot's will when the poem opens, but there is no sensational outcome to this conflict, merely the slightest adjustment in the poet's resolve. For the conflict has already passed its climax. Miss Gardner tells us that 'one of the results of Eliot's integrity is that his later work interprets his earlier, as much as his earlier work his later.' And the verse-paragraphs which go to form "Ash Wednesday" should be interpreted in the light of poems like "The Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon," while the later work serves to make clear much that the earlier failed to convey. The struggle between the 'old dispensation' and the new birth that was 'hard and bitter agony' could have only one end. And "Ash Wednesday" is concerned with the final stages of this initial spiritual victory.

The beauty of sound which "Ash Wednesday" enshrines, serves not merely to echo the poem's meaning, but often to contradict it. This is most evident in the first paragraph of the fifth section. The "I" of "Ash Wednesday" is a will, not a personality; the will directs the sense of the poem, and is

with that of:

"Surely I saw, and still before my eyes
Goes on that headless trunk that bears for light,
Its own head swinging, gripped by the dead hair,
And like a swinging lamp that says 'Ah me
'I severed men, my head and heart
Ye see here severed, my life's counterpart.'" (Near Perigord)

Dante seems to have affected both Eliot and Pound in the same way, to have brought about a noticeable tightening in the blank-verse of both poets; though Pound is here engaged in direct translation.

in this paragraph trying to make a simple and direct statement. That the will is blinded by the Logos is made clear by the sound, which serves to complicate and confuse what is being said. Similarly, though the poem begins with a direct statement, 'I do not hope to turn again,' this statement is contradicted by the tentative, turning movement of the verse, and we are aware that only one side of the debate is finding expression in the sense. It is not until we meet with the firm and incontestable statement, "Because I know that time is always time" that the opposition is silenced, and even so the poet proceeds with some caution, reminding himself at intervals of his decision, by repeating the first line of the poem. The will, then, is not yet made perfect; but the last section of the poem embodies its more complete triumph: it is now determined enough to consider steadily those images of the world which it previously had to forbid direct expression. And it should be noted that it is no longer the 'silken girls' which impede the will, but the seashore imagery represents the natural man's desire to assert the reality known to the senses.*

The imagery of "Ash Wednesday" is as clear and lovely as is that image in "Animula" of 'running stags' which I have noted. And the connection between the two poems must be established. With the submission of the will to which "Ash Wednesday" bears witness, Eliot seems to have achieved the spiritual regeneration which the 'death, our death' of the "Journey of the Magi" demanded. Matthiessen tells us that 'of all Eliot's poems "Ash Wednesday" would have the best chance of appealing to an audience that could neither read nor write.' The audience in question would be an audience of children or of adults whose vision would remain as uncontaminated as the vision of childhood, and I am in full agreement with the critic, though I cannot believe that "Ash Wednesday" would be thus distinguished 'purely through the beauty of its sound.' For the vision of the poem is a child's vision. The poet's eye hesitates over just those objects which would delight a child, white shining bones whose sinister associations are not even perceived, a woman 'going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,' jewelled unicorns drawing by a gilded hearse. Evil has been subjected to the same clear scrutiny, and thus the image of 'the toothed gullet of an aged shark' has the air of an image that is looked at: it is a repellent image, for a child

For this, and for some other remarks in this chapter, I am indebted to Mr. E. E. Duncan-Jones writing in "Focus Three." Mr. Jones does not attempt to explain "Ash Wednesday" as a whole, but has much invaluable textual criticism of individual lines, and I would refer the reader to him for a more detailed analysis of the poem.

may be repelled by evil, but it has been steadily and innocently considered. Even lines which, had Hopkins written them, would have been agonising and racking, lines like :

. . . . Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream.'

seemed purged of agony, transfigured and made delicate by contemplation. And the reference to the 'aged eagle' may be misunderstood at a cursory reading. It is by the inflections of the verse, by sound, that the poet has suggested the mystical nature of this new vision; a clear visual image is made mysterious by simple repetition of epithet in :

. . The lady is withdrawn
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.'

We meet with a similar device in "Burnt Norton" :

and the lotus rose, quietly, quietly.'

and Mr. Raymond Preston, in a note on this passage, refers the reader to Dante's 'si soprastando al lume intorno intorno. . .' It may be that Eliot was following Dante in thus suggesting the mystery of clear vision; the figure of the lady certainly serves to remind us of Beatrice. But the allegory, and even the symbolism of the poem, are purposely left vague, and the identity of this lady is not made clear. In telling his story so that it seems no story, Eliot is both child and mystic: 'the insistence throughout is on states of spiritual feeling.'

The fourth section of "Ash Wednesday" also reminds us of "La figlia che piange," though the Lady has stepped out of the formal landscape and is now, indeed, its creator, having

'made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs.'

To compare the versification of these two poems is to become fully aware of the development which has taken place within Eliot's ten-syllable line. Of the verse of "La figlia che piange" we may say, as the author said of Tennyson, that it is 'cruder, because less capable of expressing complicated, subtle, and surprising emotions.' The influence of Dante and that of church ritual have served to modulate the heroic Elizabethan rhythms, but they are still to be detected in "Ash Wednesday," and though the poet uses full, sweet, Victorian rhymes the body

of the verse is athletic as Tennyson's verse is not. The verse of "Marina" is less self-confident. Eliot could not sit still for ever, and he represents himself in Marina as having embarked upon a spiritual voyage: yet we feel that he has not gone down to the sea in ships, but rather brought the sea into the temple. A comparison of the poem with "The Dry Salvages" makes "Marina" seem very artificial, and the diffuseness of imagery and occasional slackness of verse-structure cannot be excused by the fact that the poet has chosen a rather foggy subject. "Marina" is meant to convey a sense of mystery, but there is no undefined allegory at the back of the statement, and though the poem rises to a quite moving climax, we feel this climax to be engineered. It was the mystery behind the apparent simplicity of "Ash Wednesday" which convinced, and for mystery "Marina" has substituted subtlety. The influence of "Ash Wednesday" is, however, apparent in the gentleness of the poem, in lovely lines like:

. . . Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
By this grace dissolved in place,'

but the effect of this passage is diminished by the sacrificial rites which precede it, and not even a reminiscence of Alice Meynell can mend this disunity of approach.

I do not know that there is not an allusion in the title of "Gerontion" to Newman's poem, where Gerontius, having been selected to meet his God, is commanded to 'Use well the interval.' Certainly life has become a mere interval 'between birth and dying' to the Eliot of the middle period, and the perplexity which the full realisation of this fact brought with it, together with the agony of his death and rebirth into the Christian life, brought his poetry into a state of apathy and diffuseness. From this perplexity "Ash Wednesday" bloomed, a 'single rose,' but something which by its very nature could not be repeated. For the poem is grounded, as I have said, upon the answered prayer 'teach us to sit still,' and thus upon a state of mind which must necessarily be impermanent, for, as Eliot says later:

we must be still and still moving
into a further union, a deeper communion.'

"Marina," a poem of embarkation, marks the beginning of this movement, and returns to the style of "A Song for Simeon": for movement was to take Eliot further and further from the attitude, and thus the very form and style, of "Ash Wednesday."

The second section of "Ash Wednesday," though it exploits the long line, which was to serve for the metric of all the later work, more fully than any other poem of the middle period, bears only a slight stylistic resemblance to the "Four Quartets." Where this poem, a vision of the death and resurrection of the spirit, is packed with images of dazzling whiteness, as are appropriate to the moment of revelation, and is unfolded in a spirit of child-like rejoicing, the verse of the "Quartets" is bare, their progress steady and at times stately. And the poet, whose verse-music and imagery, having declined, flourish here at the expense of definite meaning, dispenses with these adornments, wishing no longer for suggestiveness but for clarity.

THE PLAYS

V

‘New styles of architecture, a change of heart.’
—*W. H. Auden.*

WHAT may be called the charity of “Ash Wednesday” is contradicted in the poem “Marina,” where Eliot gives us fair warning that he has not forgiven the world its sins. And that strain of bitter condemnation, which colours much of his religious poetry, is at its most evident in the fragments of “Sweeney Agonistes,” which are included in the Collected Poems. It is not easy to tell from these fragments what direction the play was to have taken. Eliot has established a connection with Aristophanes, and the tone of what we have is certainly derisive, but the attitude is not that of the earlier Sweeney poems, and Sweeney himself remains a somewhat cryptic figure. The poet has given us an indulgent, if apprehensive, character, but this is not the man, any more than the ‘Queen of Hearts, Mrs. Porter’ is the lady of the “Waste Land.” Or perhaps they are the same people viewed in a different light, but it is certain that Sweeney, as here presented, has more of the penetration of a visionary, than of the disappointing sanity of the conventional hero. When he says, ‘I’ve been born and once is enough,’ we catch a reference to the necessity for spiritual rebirth, which was probably the uppermost thought in Eliot’s mind when he wrote this play, and his most telling speech, ‘Well, here again that don’t apply’ is a kind of allegory of the death of the spirit:

‘If he was alive then the milkman wasn’t
and the rent-collector wasn’t.’

If Sweeney is indeed to be compared with Samson, as the title of the play would suggest, then he was to have brought down the temple of iniquity about the ears of the unfaithful, though himself blind. And it may be that the climax of the play is preserved for us in the “Agon.” Sweeney tells Doris that ‘life is death’ and expands his argument for the benefit of the assembled company. That everyone is convinced is apparent from the concluding chorus, which we have, with its nine sym-

bolic blocks, but it would appear that Sweeney convinces them at a single blow. If this part of the play is complete, their conversion is not very satisfactory, for we have the ineradicable impression that none but Snow is really listening to 'Mr. Sweeney's story,' though Eliot is at pains to tell us that they are very interested.' One would suppose that the conclusion remains imperfect, and that Eliot either has not written, or has not wished to preserve, whatever discussion was to have preceded the mass conversion. It may be that Sweeney, being in his cups, was literally to have destroyed the temple that is Doris' flat.

Sweeney himself is blind, in so far as he does not see the significance of his own revelation, and also more literally, for he is blind drunk. Drunkenness is the infallible weapon of the music-hall artist, and it is Eliot's intention in "Sweeney Agonistes" to dramatise a full-length music-hall. Though he has made good use of slapstick, he has not seen his way to descend to repartee, preferring to rely upon the aggression of a language at once tough and grotesque, backed by the pyrotechnics of his comic song verse-rhythms. There is also a sinister undercurrent of irony, as in the passage:

'SWEENEY: I'll be the cannibal

DORIS: I'll be the missionary,
I'll convert you,

SWEENEY: I'll convert you. . . .'

Sweeney is indeed to convert Doris to the knowledge of her own spiritual death, and in the light of the final chorus the cutting of the cards also takes on a new significance, for the Coffin is, after all, appropriate. The heightened music-hall technique is employed, not arbitrarily, but to good purpose, for it enables the poet to persuade us that his characters are hollow men and women, really dead. Sam Wauchope, the Knave of Hearts, whose function with Mr. Pereira's young ladies is that traditionally assigned to his office, is ostensibly purposive, a tough guy, and so are his American friends. But as music-hall comedians they are required to sing a comic song, in which song the complete vacuity of their lives and desires is bodied forth:

'My little island girl
I'm going to stay with you
And we won't worry what to do
We won't have to catch any trains
And we won't go home when it rains
We'll gather hibiscus flowers. . . .

Eliot saw the music-hall as an art-form concerned with grim, brutal farce, much as Marlowe saw the comic drama of the morality plays,* and has employed it as such. The music-hall does not deal in individuals but in types, and Eliot has taken the species of laconic, Ernest Hemingway, man about town, and exposed this type to the general ridicule, just as a comedian might expose the type of the vacant aristocrat. If the tone of this ridicule resembles that of the "Hollow Men," the play's bitterness is at least directed against a particular object, where that of the earlier poem is general and diffuse; and such bitterness does not seem out of place on the boards.

"Sweeney Agonistes," being a music-hall must be criticised by music-hall standards, and though it would probably, if complete, have been a triumph of its kind, it would definitely have been a dead end. It was Eliot's purpose, in writing the play, to make us look at middle-class godlessness through the eyes of the frequenters of the halls, the common people. Whether the people really find godlessness as inane as it is here represented is an open question, and irrelevant, but the fact remains that godlessness can only be denounced once, and that the music-hall is an unsatisfactory medium for poetry which is not destructive. The experiment could not, for this reason, have been successful, and Eliot had still not found a form and style appropriate to his new poetry. "Murder in the Cathedral" was to provide the solution to these difficulties, but it will be convenient to deal first with the poem "Coriolan," which is in several ways connected with it.

It would seem that Eliot, when he wrote the "Coriolan," had something new and definite to say, but no very clear conception of how to say it. Thus the two sections of the poem which we have are written in a verse no longer thin, but rather over-crowded, yet it is still the same trailing and diffuse verse-pattern, undistinguished by any show of energy except the self-conscious and highly artificial energy with which Eliot is always ready :

' May we not be some time, almost now, together,
 If the mactations, immolations, oblations, impetrations
 Are now observed
 May we not be
 O hidden
 Hidden in the stillness of noon, in the silent croaking night. . . ' etc.

Though the reduplication of epithet in this passage may be primarily meant to suggest the poet's weariness with democratic

* See Eliot's "A note on the blank verse of Christopher Marlowe," in "The Sacred Wood."

red tape, there is also an attempt to recapture the driving force of rhetoric. We have only to compare the passage with those earlier lines which expressed a similar weariness :

‘ There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet. . .

to see how unsuccessful this attempt is. And there are other factors which combine to the poem’s disadvantage. Though simplicity of statement was in place in “ Sweeney’s Agonistes,” a people’s entertainment, it does not tell to such effect in the “ Coriolan,” an essentially bourgeois performance. On reading lines like :

That is all we could see. But how many eagles! And how many trumpets!”

we may be excused for feeling that this was not all, and that Eliot himself is here guilty of a sin for which he has had Milton condemned, that of over-simplifying an essentially complex situation. It may be, however, that the people and the leader alike are being presented through a mirror-character, though the identity of the mirror, if any, remains obscure. Such a technique suggests that Eliot may be working on the pattern of the “ Waste Land,” as also does the frequent juxtaposition of ancient and modern themes, the motif which is represented by Arthur Edward Cyril Parker being set against that of ‘ the fletchers and javelin-makers and smiths.’ These hints inspire the critic to look for a definite musical pattern, and the two sections which Eliot has preserved close with phrases which read suspiciously like codas, while the passage beginning

‘ 5,800,000 rifles and carbines.

might most charitably be dismissed as a bridge passage. One might also go further and say that the two subjects of the first section are the ‘ eagles and trumpets ’ and the ‘ eyes watchful, waiting, perceiving, indifferent.’ But the musical structure is certainly not self-evident, as it was in the “ Waste Land ”; if such a pattern is indeed intended, it would seem, like the vision of the patient bystanders, to have undergone a process of simplification. And, in the light of the “ Four Quartets,” we may well suppose that Eliot was here trying to make his pattern unobtrusive, but gave up the attempt when he found that the poem became unwieldy and diffuse in consequence.

Such a criticism can only be guesswork, but it is obvious that the “ Coriolan ” is an unsatisfactory poem for very differ-

ent reasons than is the "Journey of the Magi." There the poet's whole attitude was confused and perplexed; he is not certain of any destination, and can only question himself

were we led all that way for
Birth or Death?'

He is now confident, and can see his way to a positive statement; he speaks out:

'There he is now, look
There is no interrogation in his eyes. . .

But he is not yet ready to express himself on the grand scale, as he had done in the "Waste Land." Before the universal statement of that poem came the individual examples of the "Poems, 1920," and in the story of Thomas Becket Eliot found an equivalent subject for his later poetry.

The "Coriolan" is concerned with a leader of the State whose eyes remain fixed on God, symbolised by 'the still point of the turning world,' and with what Eliot considers the corollary to this proposition, the inefficiency of a people's state, where perpetual commissions come to no good end, presumably because each man fixes his eyes before his feet. It is implied that the people (and Eliot's sympathy, he tells us somewhere in his essays, is with the lower classes) are indifferent to either form of rule, being concerned only with their personal misadventures, a great crying out of 'crumpets' or what you will: the mere idea of a single leader, however, satisfies their innate desire to hero-worship. (Critics have seen in what Eliot has called his Royalism a strain of divinely inspired necromancy) He has been accused of foretelling accurately the rise of Fascism and the procrastination of Munich. But Becket is also the type of the pious hero, and his third tempter appears as a kind of mediaeval socialist.* He tells the archbishop that

'A powerful party
has turned its eyes in your direction'

and tries to enlist his services in 'the fight for freedom.' And it seems more probable that the poet's political views were

In the same way it is not by accident that the Four Knights speak like characters of Mr. George Bernard Shaw. It would appear that Eliot saw some similarity between the condition of England in Becket's day, and the political confusion of the thirties. How far we press the comparison is our own responsibility: the whole play could be read as an allegory by anyone who wished.

rooted in middle-ages tradition, while it is significant that the style of "Murder in the Cathedral" often corresponds to that of Langland.) I will quote certain relevant passages :

'King commands, Chancellor richly rules.
This is a sentence not taught in the schools.'

'Look to your behaviour. You were safer
Think of penitence and follow your master.'

'To condemn kings, not, serve among their servants
Is my open office.'

The correspondence extends even to the personification of 'Leave-well-alone, the springtime fancy,' a personification which Langland would certainly have envied. Eliot's political views seem also to show a marked affinity with those of his model : for Langland was likewise a Royalist, though his sympathies were with the common people. 'Taxed by landlords and over-taxed by children,' he represents them as having slight interest in affairs of state, being too much weighed down by their own lots. It is interesting to compare this attitude with that of Eliot, not only in the "Murder of the Cathedral," but also in the "Coriolan." The nameless leader of this poem would also serve as the type of Langland's ideal ruler.

Whatever Eliot's political sympathies, it is apparent that the ideas which could not be contained in the "Coriolan" find expression in the "Murder in the Cathedral." But these ideas are necessarily modified to some extent, in accordance with historical propriety : so also is the style of the play. As I have said, there is much imitation of Langland, and though Langland himself is not contemporary with Becket, he does at least bring us into the political world of the middle-ages. There seems also to be phrases reminiscent of earlier English poetry : vivid, detached pictures like 'the torn girl trembling by the mill-stream' suggest the "Owl and the Nightingale," while there is one passage, that beginning

'Nothing lasts but the wheel turns
The nest is rifled, and the bird mourns. . .

which resembles, though from a distance, a famous speech in the "Beowulf." The Chorus do much to set an appropriate stage ; evil usually appears to them in animal shape, and some of their animals might have stepped out of a mediæval bestiary. Shakespeare, no less than the compilers of bestiaries, dealt in animal symbols, and there is a very Shakespearian speech near

the beginning of the play, where the people are described welcoming Becket :

‘with scenes of frenzied enthusiasm
lining the road and throwing down their capes.’

When the messenger regrets that the archbishop’s horse ‘will be deprived of its tail,’ however, we feel that Eliot’s purpose must be to unseat Heywood as the prose Shakespeare. And there is a certain tendency to be banal, a delight in clumsy, prosaic statement, which runs counter to the period atmosphere throughout this play.

{ There are several reasons for the adoption of this prosy style. I have already suggested that “Murder in the Cathedral,” among other things, points a comparison between twelfth-century and contemporary politics, and to make good such a comparison it was necessary for the style to fluctuate between the mediæval and the modern speech idioms. } Thus lines like :

‘A patched up affair, if you ask my opinion
And if you ask me, I think the Lord Archbishop
Is not the man to cherish any illusions. . . .’

come to be admitted into the poem, and carry with them an undercurrent of satire, as they lay bare the portentousness of the rather insignificant speaker. Apart from the messenger, only the Priests, who are certainly people not wholly commendable, and the evil characters speak thus pompously, and it is to the discomfiture of such persons that the political comparison is drawn. (Then again, “Murder in the Cathedral” is an experimental play;) Eliot’s dramatic style evolved through the Choruses which he wrote to the “Rock,” but it is not yet self-assured. He was working upon the pattern of Pound’s “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” and was trying to keep his rhythms fairly near to those of modern speech. With such an end in view, he went very warily, profiting from the example of Elizabethan overstatement. Thus Becket, when some passion might have been expected, is content to say moderately :

‘We do not know very much of the future
Except that from generation to generation
The same things happen again and again’

And it is not for nothing that a second comparison is drawn in the line “Samson in Gaza did no more.” {The influence of Milton, which is first acknowledged in “Sweeney Agonistes,” is apparent in “Murder in the Cathedral” also, for the classical construction of the play is nearer to that of the “Samson”

than to Greek drama. But one feels that, though he acquiesced in structure, Eliot was determined not to admit the verse-music of Milton's play into his style, and that he has deliberately gone to the other extreme.)

Becket himself is hardly a personality, but a will revealed in the process of being made perfect in God. He speaks with uniform simplicity, and reveals his heroism by means of 'understatement.' For he is represented as a hero rather than a mystic. Eliot was writing for the stage and was thus writing for all classes of men; and he has gone to great pains to make Becket's motives intelligible to each member of his audience. The Archbishop's actions and decisions are all grounded upon a single precept:

'Neither does the agent suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience.'

and this precept is brought to our notice, rather in the manner of a geometrical proposition, at the beginning of the play. After having been the subject of discussion among both priests and chorus, Becket appears upon the stage at the dramatically appropriate moment; and Eliot has subtly woven what we may call the proposition of the play into his first speech. As if to drive them home, he has given these same words to the Fourth Tempter, who repeats them at the climatical moment of the first part of the play, when he would appear to have checkmated Becket. And all Becket's subsequent meditations are variations upon this simple theme, and serve to recall it to the mind. Thus Eliot achieves a kind of dramatic coup d'état, for once we accept this 'eternal patience' as a necessary starting-point, we immediately find that abstention from movement replaces movement, and discipline action, in the mechanics of the plot; and this quite logically and without any further intrusion of Eliot's mysticism. The struggle in Becket's mind is equally transfigured, and by the personification of the forces of evil as flesh-and-blood Tempters, Eliot succeeds in making tangible what might have been a difficult and dramatically unacceptable scene of meditation. The chorus likewise express their perception of the forces of evil in outward and visible terms, as when they see

'Rings of light coiling downwards, descending
To the horror of the ape.'

The effect of such a technique is to express what is mysterious, 'out of time,' in terms of this world; the sense of mystery is

not, however, lost, but intimated in the ritual of the play, the weird and moving speech-rhythms of the Chorus, against which the Knights' speeches seem trivial and absurd.* Becket himself, however, neither speaks nor acts mysteriously, nor is there any element of ritual in the rhythms behind his speeches. For he is a man who has quit meditation and returned to the world of men, in order to become the instrument of God's purpose in this world.)

Apart from Becket, only the Chorus command our sympathy, or the sympathy of the Archbishop himself. For they, as representatives of the common people, belong to that class which includes the Sweeney of "Sweeney Agonistes" and Downing in the "Family Reunion." They are 'living and partly living,' which is more than can be said for the priests, and though they are afraid to attempt communion with God, having been born and 'once is enough,' they are still close enough to the real principles of life to perceive something of the significance of the pattern. They are to be contrasted with the priests, who in making their escape from penury have lost touch with the reality of things. The populace of the "Coriolan," who represented the common people of the twentieth-century, had equally lost touch, and even Downing, though he is preserved from spiritual corruption by his integrity and loyalty to Harry, has a perception much less immediate than theirs. An expansion of this comparison will establish the connection between the two plays.

It is not at first apparent how far we are to take the superstition of the old women of Canterbury as being grounded upon instinctive vision. For it is not necessarily mystic experience which prompts them to see 'scaly wings slanting over, huge and ridiculous,' and the actual visual images themselves do not suggest revelation. But there is something convincing in the biblical language in which the Chorus express their vision, a language sturdy and assured, conveying nothing of the uncertainty which follows upon hallucination; and something further in the incantatory rhythms which underlie their words. Downing speaks in accents which differ from those of the Piper family only in being less genteel. He is not at first a very imposing figure.

For what my judgement's worth, I always said his Lordship
Suffered from what they call a kind of repression.'

The Knights are trivial after the murder. Until they have killed Becket, their speeches are part of the eerie, processional ritual of the play, for they are instruments of a power not their own, they form part of the pattern. When they explain their deed, however, they are telling us only what they thought they came for.

He seems to be a kind of low comedy character, whose function it is to express inane opinions. It comes, then, as a great and beautifully engineered shock when he tells us at the end of the play that

‘I’ve always said whatever happened to his Lordship
Was a kind of preparation for something else.’

This is a device which is popular with Mr. J. B. Priestley, to make the man who is always wrong, finally and epigrammatically right. But Eliot does not leave it at that; he gives Downing the chance to consolidate his victory over our emotions; in his next speech the chauffeur reveals that he saw the Eumenides, ‘them ghosts,’ before ever Harry did. And upon reflection, we realise that Eliot is not giving us, like Mr. Priestley, an example of the more or less inexplicable: he is rather explaining to us what Mr. Priestley has merely recognised. The vision of the chauffeur is, like that of the old women of Canterbury, direct mystical vision, though something has been lost. (The old women of Canterbury saw and believed, where Downing sees and ponders what to believe.) With Downing we come up against the barrier of the “I,” and what is seen has to revolve about that “I,” and be explained in terms of it; thus we are never quite sure what Downing has made of the ghosts, though we know he has seen them. And it is for this reason that Eliot has made him speak banally, and has not directly indicated the nature of his vision, while both language and rhythm serve as indication in the “Murder in the Cathedral.”

Writing in the Cambridge Concise History, George Sampson complains that the style of the “Family Reunion” is ‘indistinguishable from that of prose.’ While he cannot be contradicted, I do not feel that he has cause for complaint. For it is not only Downing whose vision has been rendered impure by the intrusion of the self, it is every character in the play. Thus the Chorus speak honestly in the safety of the Chorus, when each is one of many, but as individuals their words are the merest self-deceit. Thus even Agatha owns to a private, superficial, and meaningless existence as

‘the efficient principal of a women’s college,’

where her energy is diverted into channels of ‘trying not to dislike women.’ The self has blunted their perception of God, and it is to underline this fact that Eliot has made them speak in a verse approaching prose. Words are now being conceived quite apart from their relation to the Logos; thus

the poet has made use of a language which seems to have no 'roots that clutch,' and a rhythm which is not in any way evocative.' When the metric pattern tightens, we know that the speakers are approaching a recognition of the mystery of things, and imagery is only used by those characters who are capable of coming to such a recognition, Agatha, Mary and Harfy, and by Amy, who cannot but be conscious of the compelling issue of death, though she cannot see beyond death. The plot of the "Family Reunion" serves to indicate how much has been lost: ("Murder in the Cathedral" gave us a hero who started with complete faith in God, and has only to proceed without wavering to achieve his destiny, but here the hero starts in a condition of utter unbelief, and, with his initial decision to 'follow the bright angels,' the play's climax is reached.)

In a play whose characters were only aware of the pattern of things by fits and starts, it was difficult for Eliot to indicate the mystic nature of that pattern. It was no longer possible for him to present us with signpost characters in his chorus: and the chorus of the "Family Reunion" are busy denying what each has affirmed in his individual existence, rather than relating the action of the play to God. Agatha speaks cryptically upon occasion, but it is much more difficult for us to integrate her banality and mysticism, in so far as they are two tendencies within a single individual, than it was to fathom in "Murder in the Cathedral," when one set of characters were invariably banal, and another quite dissociated set of characters permanently visionary. Eliot is at pains to make Agatha seem mysterious, as in the first scene of the play, when after a single sinister pronouncement

'Wishwood was always a cold place, Amy,'

she maintains a protracted silence throughout the irrelevant chatter that follows, to reenter the conversation with her powerful

"I mean painful, because everything is irrevocable," but the etiquette of table-talk is against her, and she has to continue lamely on the lines of 'daring feats on the old pony.' For Agatha, like the Chorus, is fighting a rather negative battle. She is fighting to dethrone the hard school mistress in herself 'Who knew the way of dominating timid girls,' and on a more essential plane of her being, she is fighting to reestablish vision, where vision has been lost. Even her perception is only frag-

The "Family Reunion" stands, in this respect, at the opposite pole to "Ash Wednesday" in Eliot's poetry.

mentary; and Eliot has found it necessary to underline the affirmation of his characters by means of the plot.

(Both "Murder in the Cathedral" and the "Family Reunion" are crime stories, and though he takes care to tell us of the latter play that 'what we have written is not a story of detection,' Eliot has made use of detective methods in unravelling its plot of sin and expiation.) This was not necessary in "Murder in the Cathedral," where the murder itself was the dramatic end, and the poet could proceed simply and inevitably to this conclusion without fear of leaving the real significance of his play obscure. Here, however, the pattern behind the events could be revealed only by process of investigation, and Harry plays a double part, being both suspected murderer and his own detective. The Eumenides provide him with a clue, which although he interprets it falsely, at least leads him back to his own childhood. Here he is able to take to a kind of theory, and fixes his attention upon the movements of his own father, but can proceed no further until Agatha supplies the missing link in his chain of evidence. Then only has he spiritual proof. And it is the mystery of this story that comes home to us most closely; something is felt to be behind the scenes, and it is not the Eumenides, but a hidden force of which they are the outward and visible signs. Eliot accentuates this mystery by introducing completely extraneous characters into the plot, the Piper Cubs, Arthur and John: they are anticipated, but never arrive, and it is as if some inexplicable force detained them. Sergeant Winchell also appears on the stage, it would seem, merely in order to shock us, and it comes as complete anticlimax when he proclaims the real reason for John's absence, while a second anticlimax follows in the discovery of Arthur's misdemeanour. So successfully has Eliot woven his aura of mystery, however, that we remain unconvinced that these explanations are satisfactory, and are not surprised to find later that the purpose of their absence was really that the curse might work itself out on Amy.

This detective story method is employed in order that the divine pattern may be, as far as is possible, investigated, and an unavoidable consequence is that the plot of the play becomes involved, and the poet is forced to depart from the classical form of construction. It was the achievement of "Murder in the Cathedral" to weld so many conflicting styles into a whole, and yet to remain simple and convincing. Eliot not only studded his verse with reminiscences of mediæval poetry, but contrived to induce an undercurrent of political

satire into his play, as Milton had done before him in "Samson Agonistes," while pointing to a higher reality which is not evident in Milton's play.) The "Family Reunion," however, has an opposite purpose.) (The poet here takes a fairly simple and apparently insignificant theme, and attempts to make it mysterious, and in the long run inexplicable.) Where Becket had been a mystic made heroic, Harry is a tragic hero made mystic. But though the "Family Reunion" is, for this reason, necessarily more diffuse and perhaps not altogether so convincing as its predecessor, it is stylistically more assured. The pattern of the verse is deceptively facile, for the central scene of the play, that of Harry's spiritual reunion with Agatha, is more subtly constructed and conveys more delicate shades of emotion than anything in "Murder in the Cathedral." And Harry's farewell to his mother

'my address Mother
Will be care of the Bank of London until you hear from me,'

is a not unsuccessful attempt to attain the effect of 'Pray you undo this button' in contemporary speech. Yet the verse of the play is not merely daring; it is fully under Eliot's control and capable of supporting a more personal religious poetry; and the "Family Reunion" uncovers a wealth of material sufficient to furnish Eliot for this later poetry, and perhaps to inspire it.

“THE FOUR QUARTETS”

‘To understand “Four Quartets” we need to live with them, and even to live by them.’—*Raymond Preston.*

WE have it, on the authority of Miss Helen Gardner that the “Four Quartets” are constructed on a pattern similar to that of the “Waste Land,” and it is profitable to make some further examination of the “Waste Land” on the light of these later poems. The musical framework of Eliot’s symphony comes to seem rather like an enormous flying machine which the poet has constructed in order to negotiate heights of poetry otherwise unattainable for him. And I think Eliot found his contrivance rather unwieldy, and the compression and occasional distortion of statement which it necessitated not very satisfactory. It is not proven whether the “Coriolan” is an unfinished second symphony, but I think it may be, and believe that the poet, when he wrote it, was trying to make his technique less noticeable to the reader. (For the “Waste Land” seems essentially the work of a young poet, taking pride in the exhibition of his technique even though he is at pains, in his notes, not to reveal its secret. When he wrote the “Four Quartets,” however, Eliot was more restrained.) Here the technique, though it is still near that of the earlier poem, seems relatively unimportant: it is there to be unravelled, if the critic will, but as with the allegory of what I consider the most difficult poem in our language, it will not bite the critic, if he does not interfere with it. It may, however, be of use to examine the structure of the first of the “Quartets,” “Burnt Norton,” in its relation to that of the “Waste Land.”

The first movement of “Burnt Norton” opens with a tentative and highly formal introductory passage, similar to that with which the “Waste Land” begins, at least in so far as it prepares the reader not only for the movement, but for the whole body of the work it precedes. For the “Quartets” are concerned in the first place with time, and what is stated here so tentatively is remembered in the completely confident and final statements of “Little Gidding.” And from the delicacy of this introductory passage issues the first subject, stated in more assured terms:

'What might have been
Point to one end which

This subject is not expanded to any length, and the assurance of the poet's tone dwindles as he proceeds. A brief, perplexed bridge passage follows, and then comes the second subject, taking us into 'our first world'—and we are not dealing, as Eliot reminded us, 'with the lifetime of one man only,' but with our common heritage. This second subject is as tentatively put forward as the first, though it is not tentative for the same reason: we are not here concerned, as before we were, with doubtful metaphysical propositions, but with images, which, though they are perceived as from a great distance, are yet for a time within the poet's grasp, and capable of expansion. Accordingly, the subject is developed at some length, until it abruptly dies, and the movement ends with a simple repetitive coda.

The second, slow movement, opens with a lyric which, although in its actual form it seems very different, fulfils the same function as the descriptive passage beginning 'The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,' in the "Waste Land." This passage was an attempt to convey by accumulative description what we are later told by means of a dramatic dialogue, that the Belladonna's life is quite fruitless and futile: and in the same way Eliot is here trying to explain indirectly, by means of 'sense-impression,' as Raymond Preston has it, what he afterwards proceeds to tell us by direct statement: 'At the still point of the turning world, neither flesh nor fleshless.' It is apparent that this lyric and this statement constitute the two subjects of the movement, which concludes with a repetition of something that has been said before, but is now made to point to a very different conclusion, that

'involved with past and future
Only through time time is conquered.'

With the second movement the third is to be contrasted, for it deals with 'a place of disaffection,' while we have been reading of 'the moment in the arbour where the rain beat,' a place of quite an opposite significance. This movement is rather an incantation than a dance, and has two clearly defined subjects, the first, that of the 'strained, time-ridden faces,' developed at some length, the second, concerned with 'the world of perpetual solitude,' necessarily terse and concentrated. They are presented quite simply, and the poet returns upon the first subject only in order to bring the movement to its close.

We have now explored quite fully the two statements which had been propounded in the first movement: the 'one end, which is always present' has been examined and brought more nearly within our apprehension as 'the still point of the turning world,' and the theme 'human kind cannot bear very much reality' has been expanded, inasmuch as we have stood face to face with the world moving 'in appetency, on its metallated ways.' Having completed his expansion of the themes of the first movement, Eliot gives us, as in the "Waste Land," a fourth movement which serves concisely to sum up what his investigations have revealed, and which thus leaves him free to proceed to his conclusions. This section 'is an imagined participation in the condition of detachment . . . with a glimpse, in a flash of light of its goal'* and is expressed in a single symbol. It remains still to be stated, however, how this goal may be reached, and this is the purpose of the fifth section: Eliot's conclusions are two, first that

'Only by the form, the pattern
Can words or music reach
The stillness'

and second, that, as far as 'human kind' are concerned

'The detail of the pattern is movement,'

and being expanded as to their implications, these form the subjects of his closing movement. In dealing here with his own poetry, Eliot is returning to a theme which he has used before, at the beginning of this poem, with 'My words echo, Thus in your mind,' and when he says that 'even while the dust moves, there rises the hidden laughter of children in the foliage,' he is reminding us of the second subject of his first movement, where he was engaged 'Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves.' Thus the poem closes with a recapitulation of the central themes which have been used in its composition, though a crescendo and roll of drums like that which concluded the "Waste Land" would here have been inappropriate.

"Burnt Norton" starts from the hypothetical assumption that what a man needs is detachment, proceeds to examine first the vision which detachment brings with it, then to expose the futility of their activities, who refuse thus to discipline themselves, and brings us so far on our way as to tell us that movement is the shaping force in the pattern of a man's life. Eliot does not expand this last statement, preferring to cement it by references to the mystery of desire and love, and to his initial

* 'Four Quartets Rehearsed.'—*Raymond Preston.*

symbol of the children: thus his conclusion, though it serves as evidence to support the metaphysical postulates with which the poem begins, is not really final, and it is the function of "East Coker" to examine it in more detail. The 'silent motto' with which "East Coker" opens establishes its relation to the closing lines of "Burnt Norton," for 'In my beginning is my end' implies an unswervable but perpetually moving pattern. The poem progresses from a general survey of the rhythm of life to an examination and a refutation of the wisdom of age, from which a further conclusion as to the central theme is drawn, that 'the pattern is new in every moment.' After the recapitulatory fourth movement, Eliot offers us the discoveries he has made in the course of his second examination, that 'there is only the fight to recover what has been lost' in life, and that there is 'a lifetime burning in every moment' of a man's existence. And the poem closes with Eliot's conclusion that 'we must be still and still moving,' with a reference to 'the dark cold and empty desolation' of history, thus introducing what is to be the subject of the "Dry Salvages." For it is a purpose of this poem to make clear the connexion between the river of life and the ocean of history, in order that we may be aware that

'the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence
or even development,'

and, on the other hand, that

'On whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death—that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment).'

From his survey of the Annunciation of history, Eliot is able to come to the main conclusion of the "Dry Salvages," and of the "Quartets" as a whole, that the central, barely attainable, activity of a man's life should be to endeavour

. . . to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time,'

which is too difficult a task for most of us, who are content if our own lives are fruitful within the pattern of existence which has been put before us in the first section of "East Coker." We have now made the discovery which it was our central purpose in setting out on our voyage to make, and with "Little Gidding" are returned to more navigable waters.

The theme of this poem is the 'temporal reversion' of the last lines of "The Dry Salvages," and the poet returns upon those earlier themes of the lacerations of old age, and the apparent meaninglessness of history: we may be unable to investigate these mysteries, but if we 'kneel where prayer has been valid' before the evidence of 'the intersection of the timeless moment': if we are

'restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer,'

we shall be able to rejoice.

It was necessary to unify these several elements into a single whole, which could not possibly be a direct and epic sequence of statements. The subject for one thing did not suit with such a method of treatment, the poems constituting a kind of voyage of exploration into the abstract: and so many asides and excursions were needed for Eliot to make his meaning clear, that a conventional narrative order of presentation would have seemed the merest excuse for a poetry of digressions. Eliot has therefore cast his poems in sonata form, and as I have demonstrated with "Burnt Norton," the relation of each part to its whole is that of music. Thus the first movement of "East Coker" contains two subjects, connected by a long bridge passage which serves to set a scene, the first sketching the 'rise and fall' of human activity, the second a definite scene, that of 'the open field. . . . On a summer midnight': thus also the "Dry Salvages," giving us first a general survey of the course and attributes of 'the river,' then a clear and powerful scene on the sea-coast: and "Little Gidding" likewise, with the symbolic picture of the village in the throes of 'midwinter spring,' and the explanation of the purpose which would direct the visitor to that place. In every case the first subject is put forward comparatively shortly, the second developed at some length, and the central point of the movement is revealed during the course of this development. The second movement in each of the four poems consists of a lyric and a statement (though the statement takes the form of a dramatic scene in "Little Gidding") which lyric and statement stand for the two subjects, the movement reaching its climax in the development of the statement. The tension which has mounted during the first two movements is in every case eased in the more digressive third, whose argument is presented in a looser form, with the aid of what Mr. C. Day

* A longer and much more satisfactory prose argument of the 'Quartets' is that by B. Rajan in the 'Focus Three.'

Lewis would call fluid imagery. Thus in "East Coker" we meet with the three symbols of the 'theatre,' the 'underground train' and the operating theatre, all of which stand for the same thing, death: in "Little Gidding" the movement is even divided, quite sharply, into two parts, each with its distinctive rhythm and imagery. The fourth movement is always a recapitulation, a summing-up of the first three, in their implications, within a single symbol, and the last, as in music, is made to present the poet's conclusions, to reintroduce the central themes of what has preceded it, and to give us some intimation of what is to follow. In "Little Gidding," the last movement is completely final, and themes from each of the "Quartets" reappear, in order that Eliot may build up a truly comprehensive conclusion.

It is apparent from this brief survey that the "Quartets" are not only dependent upon a single principle, that of sonata form, but also interdependent. I have noted how Eliot prepares the way for each important new symbol, as when the sea of "The Dry Salvages" appears in the preceding poem "East Coker," invested in its full symbolic significance, not only as the 'vast waters of the petrel and the porpoise' of that poem's last movement, but also in its first section in the lines

' Out at sea the dawn wind
Wrinkles and slides. I am here
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.'

Eliot has also taken pains to connect his quartets one with another by means of recurrent themes and symbols. Thus the second subject in the second movement of each of the last three quartets is concerned with old age: in "East Coker" we have Eliot's analysis of the 'folly' of old men, in the "Dry Salvages" he discourses on how

' it seems, as one becomes older
that the past has another pattern. . .

and in "Little Gidding" are disclosed 'the gifts reserved for age.' Again, the symbol of the railway train appears in the third movement of "Burnt Norton," with its London tube scene, in the third movement of "East Coker," where the train 'stops too long between stations,' and in the "Dry Salvages" at the same point we hear of how 'the train starts, and the passengers are settled.' I do not think that this is accidental, and it is worth pointing out that with the broader field of vision of the "Dry Salvages" comes a slight adjust-

ment of the symbol: the poet is here no longer writing of the underground, but of the long-distance railway. A more important recurrence of theme comes in the last paragraph of each poem. "Burnt Norton" tells us that 'the detail of the pattern is movement,' from "East Coker" Eliot concludes that 'we must be still and still moving,' the theme is fully investigated at the climax of the "Dry Salvages":

' Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement,'

and consequently there is in "Little Gidding" mention of:

' The stillness
Between two waves of the sea.'

This repetition, both of symbol and of theme, serves a double purpose. First, it serves to cement the unity of the "Quartets," to enable us to make those connections necessary for the consideration of the work as a whole, a definite progression towards one single end. In this way, it fulfils roughly the same function as the nature-myths in the "Waste Land," though it is a much more subtle and less protrusive device. Second, it provides us with definite landmarks upon which we can be sure that each separate poem will touch. For the "Quartets" are not one poem as we have come to conceive of a poem, they are rather four concentric circles, each with a slightly larger radius than its predecessor, and each cutting the same straight lines at a slightly different point. Eliot expands his vision from poem to poem, exploring the pattern of the individual in "Burnt Norton," the pattern of mankind in "East Coker," the pattern of history in the "Dry Salvages," and returning upon his tracks in "Little Gidding" with a vision which serves to transfigure even the London scene of that poem, which is made to bear troubled witness of God in its very unearthliness 'at the recurrent end of the unending.' It cannot be too strongly stressed that the central motive of these poems is their time argument, upon which symbol, lyric, and direct statement are gradually brought to bear: and it is for this reason that the last movement of each poem, as I have shown, returns to the theme of stillness and motion. Eliot explores each of his themes—the individual, the species, and history—in several different ways, by symbolic representation, by examining the evidence which old age affords in

relation to the particular theme he is unravelling, and by more or less personal testimony. And he uses the same methods in the same order in each case, as a kind of guarantee that the conclusions he draws will not be arbitrary.

A series of poems concerned with the problem of stillness and motion could not proceed on exactly the same lines as the "Waste Land," whose subject was much more concrete. And Eliot now less often represents his subjects by dramatic scenes than by long, fully expanded symbols. There is still some tendency to return to the drama wherever possible, however, and I think it is this which spoils the third movement of the "Dry Salvages." Here Eliot seems determined to twist his symbols into dramatic episodes, and though the symbol of the train is finely worked out, and we can understand the reason for the sudden shift to 'the deck of the drumming liner'—in that, this movement being aimed to relieve the tension of what has gone before, Eliot must have been unwilling to force the mind to concentrate unduly on any one particular symbol—I feel the idea of a voice descanting 'in the rigging and the aerial' to be thin and even melodramatic. On the other hand, the second movement of "Little Gidding," where Eliot again turns from the symbol to the drama, is perhaps the most completely convincing thing in the "Quartets." The poet here succeeds in making us see in a twentieth-century air-raid something of that inscrutable pattern which the old women of Canterbury saw in everything around them: and the main symbols also are charged with the same significance. "Burnt Norton" is closely linked with the 'Family Reunion,' and the symbol of the rose garden in this poem is presented as tentatively as if it were being seen through Agatha's eyes. With "East Coker" the language broadens, and we are conscious that something has been regained: we are in contact with some more brutal reality. The "Dry Salvages" is even more brutal, but an element of mystery has entered into the symbol: we hear of the river, how

. . . his rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.'

and the sea is as weird with its 'silent fog' and 'tolling bell.' In "Little Gidding" the brutality has disappeared, or been transcended, and the mystery is all.

It is the triumph of these symbolist passages, then, that they convey by their language and implications the sense of progress from doubt to certitude, while remaining wedded to

their contexts. I have been dealing only with the fully developed symbols, which appear in the first section of each poem, but the lyric subject in the second movement, and the recapitulatory fourth, are also symbolic, and are made to convey the sense of progress in the same way. Thus, where the lyric and the recapitulation of "Burnt Norton" are both delicate and vaguely romantic, "East Coker" switches from a more violent flower symbolism to a very desolate hospital. The sustained lyric of the "Dry Salvages" is both weird and utterly disillusioned, and the sea symbolism persists in its recapitulation, while in "Little Gidding" mystery is implicit in the 'Ash on an old man's sleeve,' where are covert lines like 'Dust unbreathed was a house,' and 'The dove descending breaks the air' maintains the sense of mystery, though it has an air of challenging finality about it. One does not always feel these sections to be successful, however, and while they are admittedly not meant to carry the weight which his initial symbols support, they sometimes read as weak links in Eliot's argument, and disappoint in the same way as the fourth part of the "Waste Land" is disappointing. The lyrics of "Burnt Norton" especially seem unsatisfactory: the first lyric of "East Coker" is better, but Eliot himself has stigmatised it as

'a periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion.'

These three poems all seem to be attempts to win back something of the freshness of "Ash Wednesday," and it is not until he writes 'the wounded surgeon plies the steel' that Eliot seems to discover a lyric style to sort with the other sections of the "Quartets." The later lyrics are all very good indeed, though there is an unfortunate fall from grace in the "Dry Salvages," where his prose style runs away with Eliot to such a degree that he invites prayer for 'those whose business has to do with fish.'

Eliot's prose style seems here to have infiltrated into his lyric, and indeed it is in this style that the greater part of the "Dry Salvages" is written. "Burnt Norton" stands rather apart from the other "Quartets", and it is difficult to find any statement in this poem which could be said to be expressed in prose terms, unless it be the introductory passage, and even here the poet is not writing in what may be called his 'prose rhythm.' Where we might, from a reading of the other "Quartets," expect to find the prose style employed, in the statement of the second movement, the long line appears at its most sonorous and dignified, and we are reminded of the most lyrical lines of the "Coriolan." This lyricism permeates the

third movement also, and Eliot turns from his subjective to give us pictures of 'daylight Investing form with lucid stillness' and 'darkness to purify the soul.' It is in "East Coker" with the line

'That was a way of putting it, not very satisfactory

that the prose style really enters into the "Quartets," and we have the impression that Eliot has, for the first time in his poetry, stepped forward to speak with us in his own person, undisguised. And indeed it is Eliot's purpose to dramatise himself, to parade his opinions of old age upon the boards for our inspection. In "Burnt Norton," where he is examining the evidence afforded by the individual, the poet remains impersonal, but paradoxically, when he is dealing with the race in "East Coker," he offers himself as a kind of research subject, a typical specimen. For self-examination has become a necessary part of his method, and he presents his opinions quite honestly, with force and conviction, but in a style like that of the "Family Reunion," and not in any way heightened into lyricism. The verse is eminently dramatic and objective: there are signs of the influence of D. H. Lawrence, of all people, in lines like

'I do not know much about gods, but I think that the river
Is a strong brown God,'

but it stands as proof of his integrity that the most evident resemblance is to the style of Eliot's own essays, as in the passage beginning

And what there is to discover
By strength and submission, has already been discovered. . .

The effect is much more concentrated here, however, for there is a certain ruthlessness in the words, inasmuch as they are constructed upon a loose but still exacting material pattern. We feel that they have been submitted to a process of excision, that the superfluities of prose have been cut away, and that only a bare and sinewy framework remains. Though there was a whole crop of poets, during the thirties, who were prepared to burst into prose at any moment, only Eliot seems to have learned the technique of spare and direct statement in the prose style. By this means he has constructed a dramatic verse form which bears comparison, when fully extended, with the Elizabethan heroic verse, though Eliot writes at full stretch only occasionally. The last movement of the "Dry Salvages" is a

fine example of his attainment: the poet begins in a minor key, talking of communication with Mars, and the verse rises steadily to its superb climax:

‘Man’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.’*

I have said that the prose style of the “Quartets” resembles the style of the “Family Reunion.” The passage I have just quoted, however, displays the full strength and ease of Eliot’s maturity, and is as poetry far more convincing than anything in that play, and perhaps than anything Eliot had previously written. For I feel that the “Quartets” mark the consummation of the second period as certainly as the “Waste Land” marks that of the first: and it would seem that Eliot’s secular and religious poetry developed along remarkably similar lines. “Ash Wednesday” was a new beginning, was the “Prufrock” of Eliot’s mature poetry, and was followed by the plays, which, in so far as they dealt with individuals in their relation to God, were in correspondence with what I have called the special pleading of the “Poems, 1920.” After such individual examples came the universal application of the “Quartets,” and I feel the “Quartets” to bear much the same relation to the “Waste Land,” as the “Family Reunion” to the Sweeney poems, or the “Murder in the Cathedral” to “Gerontion.” Eliot reached this level of poetry largely by means of discipline. I have spoken of the spare and ruthless framework of his prose style, but it is not only in the prose sections of the “Quartets” that Eliot has whittled his language to a keen and incisive edge. The third, lyrical section of “Burnt Norton” is a fine example of the technique, which, relying almost exclusively upon heavy Latin stems of the ‘ion’ termination, can produce lovely, self-contained lines as in the picture of darkness

‘emptying the sensual with deprivation’

and powerful sustained passages like that beginning:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude

It is interesting to observe how, when Eliot is writing at full stretch, as here, his verse is apt to fall into more or less regular blank-verse pattern.

As with the language of the "Quartets," so with its symbols : for it is only by long and disciplined meditation that a poet can hope to unite symbol and subject so perfectly as Eliot has done in the "Dry Salvages." Discipline is thus at the root of the construction of the "Quartets" : it is also the keystone of their argument. And it is because of this restraint that the poems, while they are a consummation, do not necessarily mark an end. Though they are complete in themselves, Eliot has given us the impression that he has still something in reserve, and we may imagine that, having evolved a new and self-confident dramatic style, he would not find it difficult to write a play more convincing even than the "Family Reunion," if he wished.

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